

International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy



Book Reviews

Leonidas K Cheliotis (2012) (ed.) *The Arts of Imprisonment: Control, Resistance and Empowerment*. Surrey: Ashgate.

Janet Chan

UNSW Australia, Australia

Few Australians would forget the powerful portraits painted by Myuran Sukumaran, one of the Bali Nine convicted drug traffickers, who was executed on 29 April 2015 while he was in Kerobokan Prison. The strong colours and thick oil paint of his works, a style chosen by Sukumaran following his mentor, Australian artist Ben Quilty, are striking as well as tragic: a potent condemnation of the capital punishment regime that would kill the artist that the prison system had mentored and nurtured.

The fact that prisoners on death row have access to such an art program raises an important question: what are these programs designed to do? Do they provide a humane avenue for relieving the harshness of imprisonment? Do they try to empower prisoners to 'rehabilitate' themselves by engaging in positive and creative activities? Or are they simply one of the ways to manage and control prisoners so that they do not cause trouble while in custody? And what do the prisoners in these programs think? Do they find such programs empowering or controlling? Do they see engaging in art as an expression of resistance or an escape?

Cheliotis' remarkable volume of essays seeks to answer all of these questions, and more.

Consisting of 17 chapters written by international scholars in criminology, sociology, humanities and art education, and prefaced by a comprehensive introduction by the editor, this book is an impressive attempt to analyse 'thoroughly and critically' (p. 14) the complex relationships between imprisonment and various art forms, including architecture (chapter by Yvonne Jewkes), literature and visual arts (chapters by Eamonn Carrabine, WB Carnochan), literary and other writings (chapters by Vincenzo Ruggiero, Robert Johnson, Sarah Colvin), theatre (chapter by Thomas Fahy), documentary film (chapter by Michelle Brown), music (chapters by andr  douglas pond cummings, Stathis Gauntlett, Mike Nellis).

The book also examines a range of arts-in-prisons programs – including choirs (Mary L Cohen), arts education (Rachel Marie-Crane William), theatre (Aylwyn Walsh) – as well as systematic evaluations of such programs (David Gussak, Alexandra Cox and Loraine Gelsthorpe, L on Digard and Alison Liebling). The editor sets out to 'rectify the imbalance' that he finds in contemporary criminological literature, which tends to focus attention 'disproportionately and uncritically' on discussing the effectiveness of formal arts-in-prisons programs which claim to empower or rehabilitate prisoners (p. 6).

It is not surprising that Cheliotis' own analysis of arts-in-prisons programs is critical, well-argued and incisive. With the dramatic increase in the use of imprisonment worldwide, there has been a rise in arts-in-prisons programs, and a concomitant expansion in evaluation research on such programs. In answer to the question 'what are these programs for?', Cheliotis is unsparing in his criticism:

Their proclaimed mission of rehabilitating offenders is belied, first, by the lack of official effort to clearly determine the ambit of the concept and the form arts-in-prisons programmes should assume accordingly; secondly, by the fact that offender rehabilitation through the arts is unrealistically tied to recidivism reduction; and thirdly, by the broader context of opposition to the rehabilitative potentials of arts-in-prisons programmes, both at the level of unconscious desires and in terms of practically undermining their operations and outputs. (p. 11)

Drawing on Stan Cohen's insights in *Visions of Social Control*, Cheliotis points out the obvious symbolic and political functions of such programs in 'lending the inherently harsh prison system with appearances of open-heartedness and care' (p. 11). Apart from this symbolic function, such programs are also useful for 'maximising control over prisoners by rendering their participation in arts-related schemes dependent upon strict conformity with the rules and regulations of the establishment' (p. 12).

This scathing indictment of arts-in-prisons programs does not, however, deny that these programs 'may perform truly positive roles', nor that there is 'genuine care and professionalism' involved in the running of these programs (p. 14). Evidence of positive outcomes can be found in a number of chapters in the book. For example, evaluation studies found that 'the process of art-making helps alleviate depression and enhance problem-solving, socialization, and internal locus of control' (Gussak: 252). Similarly, researchers found that the *Music in Prison* program in the UK had positive impacts on prisoners' 'sense of self, their well-being, and their relationships to others': it 'instilled a sense of autonomy in them' by making them feel 'human' and increasing their self-confidence; it gave them a 'greater sense of self-efficacy'; and encouraged prisoners to support each other and 'try things without judgment' (Cox and Gelsthorpe: 266, 267, 269, 271).

Thus far this review has focused on arts-in-prisons programs although, as mentioned before, these are by no means the central concerns of this rich and diverse volume. Readers would find Jewkes' chapter on the architecture of incarceration – the 'deliberate designing-in' of disenchantment – informative as well as depressing. Carrabine's chapter provides an impressive overview of how imprisonment has been represented in literature, visual arts and media arts, and a suggestion of how public indifference to the pain of imprisonment might be overcome through 'an education in sentiment' (p. 69). The next section of the book includes four chapters that present 'case studies where the arts have been used ... to inform public consciousness about the inhumanities and inequalities served by and through imprisonment' (p. 15). These case studies include literary works such as Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, Octave Mirbeau's *Torture Garden*, and Tennessee Williams' *Not About Nightingales*; documentaries such as Frederick Wiseman's *Titicut Follies* and Errol Morris' *Standard Operating Procedure*; and hip hop music and culture in the US. There are also five chapters presenting examples of how prisoners engage with various art forms as a response or resistance to imprisonment. These include the drawings of the Austrian artist Egon Schiele, 'rebetika' songs in Greek prisons, and creative writing and autobiographies of prisoners. These chapters are variously rich, scholarly or disturbing; all are essential reading for understanding the power and responsibility of representing and responding to prisons and imprisonment.

This book is an ambitious and refreshing collection which will define future research on how the arts can witness, mediate, shape, transform, and aggravate the experience of imprisonment.

Correspondence: Professor Janet Chan, School of Law, UNSW Australia, Union Road, Sydney NSW 2052, Australia. Email: j.chan@unsw.edu.au

Please cite this review as:

Chan J (2015) Book review: Leonidas K Cheliotis (2012) (ed.) 'The Arts of Imprisonment: Control, Resistance and Empowerment'. *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy* 4(4):153-155. DOI: 10.5204/ijcjsd.v3i2.273.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 Licence. As an open access journal, articles are free to use, with proper attribution, in educational and other non-commercial settings. ISSN: 2202-8005

References

- Cohen S (1985) *Visions of Social Control: Crime, Punishment and Classification*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Hugo V (1862) *Les Misérables*. France: A Lacroix, Verboeckhoven & Cie.
- Mirbeau O (1899) *Torture Garden*. France: Fasquelle.
- Williams T (1938/1998) *Not About Nightingales*. New York: New Directions.
- Wiseman F (1967) *Titicut Follies*. Documentary film: distributed by Zipporah Films Inc.
- Morris E (2008) *Standard Operating Procedure*. Documentary film: distributed by Sony Pictures Classics.